



Precious and coveted as diamonds

Toronto's Nanny Angel Network

Story by Sarah de Leeuw

Family practitioners across Canada are increasingly being called upon to work interprofessionally, joining forces with myriad other health and social care providers to deliver more holistic care for patients. You might be forgiven if, as a physician, nannies weren't the first group of professionals that jumped to mind when thinking about care provider partnerships across disciplines.

"Still, the truth is, family physicians are a vital part of our referral system," says Audrey Guth, Founder of the Nanny Angel Network (NAN). A referral system to what, you ask? Guth's active and engaged community of volunteer nannies is entirely and altruistically devoted to families facing the reality of a mother navigating cancer.

Nanny Angel Network provides free specialized in-home relief child care support for mothers who have been diagnosed with cancer, for those requiring palliative care, and for families requiring additional relief during the bereavement period.



Nanny Angel Network staff members (left to right) Sarah, Emily, and Jensine at the head office.

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Nanny Angel Network Founder and Executive Director, Audrey Guth.



Nanny Angel Leigh Scholl with participants Liam (left) and Beth (behind curtain).

The organization also works in partnership with the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto in Ontario to ensure new medical professionals are trained in the importance of providing holistic patient care. Medical students receive field experience and community partners, like NAN, benefit from having these students work on various projects. The NAN volunteer nannies are highly trained and consummate professionals: “We only work with people who have a professional designation, for instance in early childhood education, who also have at least 1 full year of child care experience. We ask them to provide 4 hours of service a week with a 1-year commitment. Consistency is important for our families, for the children especially.”

Even with now-grown children, Guth knows first-hand what it means to be a mother navigating cancer.

“I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008. I remember sitting in treatment at Princess Margaret Hospital and another woman was sitting beside me. She had a 2-year-old on her lap. I could see how exhausted she was. I knew how exhausted I was. I asked myself, ‘What happens to that mother when she goes home?’ You don’t get time off to heal and rest when you have a 2-year-old.”

With that needle-sharp single thought, NAN was born. With a great team, focused hard work, and boundless passion, NAN has grown and matured since its inception. The organization now supports hundreds of families in the greater Toronto area, shining a light into places and times that might be some of the darkest ever experienced by a woman, her children, and her family. To date, NAN has provided more than 10 000 hours of service, made more than 3800 total visits, and supported more than 500 children.

“Our greatest hope is for the health of moms and their families, especially the children. We hope moms will have better success attending medical appointments so they can heal more fully: there won’t be so many delayed or cancelled appointments because moms can count on the hours of support we provide. Moms won’t have to take their children to doctors’ offices, hospitals, or treatments with them. Children won’t need to face that. It’s also true that around Toronto we have so many immigrant families and young mothers without extended family and social supports. They are especially in need.”

Recognizing the importance of filling what is a critical gap in the Canadian health care system, Audrey Guth will tell you, the “stars needed to be aligned” when she and others began nurturing the seedling idea that sprang to mind during her treatment in 2008: “ReThink Breast Cancer provided NAN with a Booby Innovation Grant for our first year and we garnered significant exposure when we were featured by Michael Enright in a documentary aired on CBC Radio.”

In 2014, Audrey was honoured as a CNN Hero, an award recognizing extraordinary individuals who are having a positive effect on the world. Award-winning Canadian actor Rachel McAdams has signed on as celebrity supporter of NAN.



Audrey Guth didn't set out to start an organization that would become known to millions of people and cherished and used by many. Guth has a background in public health nutrition and was an entrepreneur for years in Florida, doing things like running a bakery in addition to raising her children. As the founder of Diamond Personnel, a nationally acclaimed nanny agency, her experience and lessons learned in the industry truly reinforce the importance of what NAN can do.

"Do we wish we could do more? Yes. Of course we do. We could be operating nationally. We could be helping so many more mothers, children, and families. Every mother we speak with tells us 4 hours a week isn't enough. But they also say that 4 hours of respite is 4 hours of healing they wouldn't have received otherwise. We're figuring it out as we go along. You can't wait 'til it's perfect or it'd never get done."





The need for NAN's unique service is growing and changing. The organization's ability to adapt and evolve allows it to provide reliable service to moms in all stages of their cancer, including palliative care. "There was a young family from Brampton, Ont, with a 1-year-old and a 2-and-a-half-year-old. The mom's journey began after she went to the doctor with a pain in her leg. She was diagnosed with stage IV metastatic breast cancer while pregnant with her second child. It wasn't culturally appropriate for this family to even say the word *cancer* out loud. At first the family just told the children their mom was going to the gym when she went to the hospital." Nanny Angel Network supported this family through the process for a couple of years.

In their unique role, NAN identifies and addresses new challenges and realities facing these families. One of the ways in which the organization has responded to this need is by providing volunteer nannies with specialized training, including in grief and bereavement. "Children grieve. Mothers can be in crisis mode. Children want to know: Who will take care of me? Can I catch it? Did I cause it? There can be tremendous guilt for everyone."

Again, there is a personal narrative to Audrey Guth's impassioned advocacy around specialized nanny support for moms, children, and families battling, and sometimes losing to, cancer. "The story goes back so far. When I was 9 my father was diagnosed. I accompanied him to treatments. I was 12 when he died. I buried so many feelings. No one in my family said the word *cancer* [either]."

Working with children is about far more than entertaining them while their mom is resting, healing, or undergoing treatment. "Unresolved grief and guilt can have huge and long-term impacts on mental health; NAN is no longer just about helping a mother. It's about helping entire communities."

Guth knows many more nannies are needed for many more moms and their children. She circles back to the young mother from Brampton, whose entire family, with the help of NAN's volunteer nannies, was finally able to speak about cancer, to face the loss of their mother: "I was in for my annual screening. She was in the palliative ward. I spoke with her about dying: She told me she knew God only gave a certain number of heartbeats to every person. But she said she was less afraid of her last heartbeat because we would be there to help support her children after she was gone." 🌻

Nanny Angel Network provides free, specialized relief care for children navigating their mothers' cancer in the greater Toronto area in Ontario, including compassionate support throughout the mother's cancer treatment, recovery, and, when necessary, palliative care and bereavement services for families with children aged 12 and younger.

The Cover Project The Faces of Family Medicine project has evolved from individual faces of family medicine in Canada to portraits of physicians and communities across the country grappling with some of the inequities and challenges pervading society. It is our hope that over time this collection of covers and stories will help us to enhance our relationships with our patients in our own communities.

PHOTO TOP Family of elephants at the Nanny Angel Network head office.
PHOTOS LEFT Beth and Liam looking for angels through their telescope (above) and Beth listening to Nanny Angel Leigh Scholl (not pictured) (below).
PHOTO RIGHT Nanny Angel Leigh Scholl with Beth and Liam.

PHOTOGRAPHER Laura Bombier, Toronto, Ont

